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# Good Girl: Sweaty Palms and the Smile

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# GOOD GIRL: SWEATY PALMS AND THE SMILE

by

NUNI LEE

Under the Direction of Craig Dongoski

## ABSTRACT

My thesis exhibition “Good Girl: Sweaty Palms and the Smile” is a combination of paintings, small figurines, and a video piece illustrating the complicated emotions that arise from childhood memories and childlike impulses. My work revolves around a central figure, Good Girl. She is the reflection of me as an artist and manifests my attempt to hold on to my inner child, which is triggered by my desire to relieve her from dark emotions that she felt in her childhood. Good Girl is also a representation of a typical young girl who feels anxious about growing up. Noticeably infantile and feline in her characteristics and subtle in her expressions, Good Girl demands sensitive attention from her audience. My dream journal entries, anecdotes, and memories from childhood serve as important sources for creating images of Good Girl.

INDEX WORDS: Painting, Complexity, Emotion, Childhood, Girl, Cat, Dream, Memory

GOOD GIRL: SWEATY PALMS AND THE SMILE

by

NUNI LEE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2018

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2018

GOOD GIRL: SWEATY PALMS AND THE SMILE

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this to Tim (Seunghyun) Kuk, for his kind and loving heart. Thank you for being my husband and best friend. I love you.

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This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my thesis committee and the other faculty members of the Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design. I would like to thank my thesis committee chair Craig Dongoski for encouraging me to push beyond my comfort zone in artistic practice and imparting me his knowledge of sound as an artistic medium. I want to acknowledge Craig Drennen for thoroughly guiding me with the thesis writing and want to thank him for sharing a wide range of art and historical references, which helped me broaden my understanding of the contemporary art. Joseph Peragine has been a strong influence on me, particularly in terms of his energy and creativity in studio practice. Joseph Peragine helped me realize the enjoyment in the process of art-making and remember the fearless joy of drawing and painting as a child. Shadowing his drawing class during my second year also sparked my love for teaching students. He taught me that teaching itself is a creative process as I need to find specific ways to help each student. I also want to acknowledge Jess Jones, who guided me through my assistantship duties in the GSU Textiles Department. I was able to apply the qualities of textiles to drawing and painting process, which sometimes, seemed more appropriate for expressing what I had in mind. I would like to thank Tim Flowers for studio visits, which were always so encouraging and motivating. Tim reminded me that painting is supposed to be like playing. Lastly, I want to show my appreciation to Dr. Susan Richmond for her inspiring seminars and lectures, which introduced me to Pierre Bonnard, who became a significant stylistic reference as I developed my body of work for “Good Girl: Sweaty Palms and the Smile.” I would not have been able to grow this much and come this far without all of these wonderful and respected faculty members, and I can say without hesitation that Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design taught me everything I know now.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

There is a part of me that likes to communicate with animals non-verbally more so than communicating with people through language. In this context, domesticated cats and dogs fascinate me because they have learned to express their desires and emotions through their body languages, gestures, and facial expressions to compensate for their lack of ability to speak.

Likewise, infants and children who have not fully matured in their ability to articulate their stories and sentiments also utilize many of the nonverbal expressive strategies that domesticated animals use to communicate with their human counterparts. Such non-verbal communication often trumps verbal communication, especially when a subtle or delicate emotion needs to be conveyed beyond the limitation of our dictionaries.

I try to capture unresolved raw emotions which arise in childhood. Often, such intense or backlogged emotions are difficult to explain using words. Such limitation builds up emotional tension. Visual art is a way for me to communicate such complicated emotions and relieve the anxiety built from suppressed sentiments that have been contained inside, mostly due to social factors, such as the desire to appear capable and mature. However, these socially determined preconceptions are what I want to repudiate through my paintings. I attempt to blur the boundaries between high and low, strong and weak, and serious and frivolous.

Good Girl is the character onto which I project my raw emotions, silly as well as dark childhood stories, and vaguely remembered fragments of dreams. Good Girl maintains infantile traits and shares with myself, the artist, the desire to be understood. Because she does not have to face the pressure to grow up into an adult, she does not try to define her problems, categorize her emotions, or use the logic to make sense of everything. As the “good” in her name suggests, she

appears at first glance as if she is happy and everything is fine. However, I use muted colors and depict Good Girl as detached, suggesting that maybe, not everything is okay.

Although we, as adults, are expected to be articulate when we tell stories or describe our feelings, I believe that human sentiments are never as simple as to be categorized as one thing or another. In my thesis exhibition “Good Girl: Sweaty Palms and the Smile,” I intend to depict such childish, yet complicated emotions through a combination of drawings and paintings.

## 2 PUSH AND PULL

Good Girl is a central character in my work. She has been manifested in various forms before she finally became a concrete identity referred to as Good Girl. Before Good Girl was ever introduced in my work, I made a series of small paintings of my cat Minnie (figure 1). I realized that these portraits of Minnie were autobiographical, as I frequently projected my emotions and mental states onto Minnie and considered her to be a mirror image of myself. In most of these earlier paintings, the eyes of the cat are the predominant element of the composition. For example, in *Parisian Cat* (figure 2), a pair of cat eyes emerges from the colorful and abstractly rendered background scene. The way these are painted adhere to the anatomy of eyes, as they emerge within the background, rather than laying on top.

The attachment of felted ears on the top edge of the panel was intended to present the painting not as a two-dimensional surface, but as an object mimicking a cat. The muddy application of paint in the background suggests the texture of the cat hair. These textured surfaces are created by using fingers and other unconventional tools, such as sticks and swabs, to dig into the wet paint.

In this body of work centered around Minnie, I create a sense of confinement by cropping the image so that there is just enough amount of space for the cat to live. The background implies a sense of interiority through tight cropping and absence of recognizable landmarks.

Furthermore, in paintings such as *In the Grid* (figure 3), the cat is looking through an opening implied by the negative shape in the composition. Placing the cat eyes behind a negative space was meant to create multiple layers of planes: the first layer as the opening through which the cat peeks; the second layer as the positive space of the painting, which also functions as the screen between the cat and the viewer; and the third and the final layer as the physical surface activated by the textural grid. Multiple layers exist between the eyes of the cat and the viewer, suggesting an emotional distance or a sense of detachment. The painting functions as a mask behind which the cat is hiding.

Similarly, the ear attachments as seen in *Hide and Seek* (figure 4) reduces the angularity of the rectangle and transforms the painting into a more organic and animal-like shape, making the painting appear like an object or a mask. The combination of the two-dimensional and three-dimensional elements and blending their heterogeneity through paint was one of my primary focus of the investigation. The main reason for such exploration was to find ways to give the rectangular paintings animate characteristics. For example, in *Curled* (figure 5), the curled cat is the main subject, enveloped in the pink background; however, the three-dimensional attachment of the tail also suggests that the painting itself can be read as the cat. Similarly, in *Rainbow!* (figure 6), the cat is both the subject of the painting and the physical painting itself, as it is supported by the colorful rainbow bar that pushes it up from the ground. With the emphasis on

the eyes, body parts, and rough strokes that suggest animation, the cat paintings allude to anthropomorphism.<sup>1</sup>

Dale and his fellow researchers in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* define anthropomorphism as, “the subset of the ability to imagine the mental states of others, including interpreting – or misinterpreting – the facial expressions of animals and even inanimate objects.”<sup>2</sup> Epley and Dale suggest that anthropomorphism involves both the active and passive agents – the active (the subject) projects characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions to the passive agent (the object). Dale links anthropomorphism directly with perceiving something as cute but does not elaborate further in how the two are associated with each other. I believe that an animal or object with anthropomorphized facial features appear cute because we as humans can relate to them and project our emotions and mental states onto them. For example, a cat making sad eyes with its shoulders slouched when left alone creates a sense that the cat feels lonely, which we regard as a very refined human emotion. Simultaneously, the domestic cat’s inability to speak about its feelings elicits our sympathy and protective desires.

According to Sianne Ngai, the objectified anthropomorphic object is more susceptible to projections of the subject. For example, Ngai describes the simple-shaped frog sponge (figure 7) as having an “imposed-on mien,” which means “it bears the look of an object unusually responsive to and thus easily shaped or deformed by the subject’s feeling or attitude toward it.”<sup>3</sup> The simple-shaped frog sponge with wide opened eyes, two big nostrils, round face, and no

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Epley, Adam Waytz, and John T. Cacioppo, “On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism,” *Psychological Review* 114, no. 4 (2007), 864. Epley et al. defines anthropomorphism as the tendency to imbue the real or imagined behavior of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Paul Dale, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P. McIntyre, and Diane Negra, *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (New York; London: Routledge, 2017), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 65.

mouth appears helpless, funny, and even friendly. The simplicity of the face and its muteness enable us to project our mental and emotional states onto it. Also, its smallness, softness, and malleability remind the subjects of human babies who are unable to speak. Whether it is the sad-faced lonely cat or the silly-shaped frog sponge, the objectified anthropomorphic animals and objects allow us to project our feelings and speak on behalf of them, creating a parent-child bond. This bond is what makes us perceive something as cute. The tendency to develop an attachment to objectified anthropomorphic objects are more prevalent in pre-pubescent children compared to adults, suggesting that perhaps these objects function as a surrogate for parents.

The idea of projecting our emotions and mental state to others also applies to the fantasy of “zoomorphism,” which Dale defines as an expression of human qualities in animal form.<sup>4</sup> We can find the rise of the participatory subculture of “furries” who gather together wearing costumes and expressing animal identities.<sup>5</sup> This subculture is more widely prevalent in Japan, where hundreds of official and semi-official animal characters or mascots represent local communities.<sup>6</sup> In Japan and other Eastern Asian countries, it is common to encounter people dressed as animals (figure 8). Zoomorphism also works similarly to anthropomorphism in that it creates a portal, allowing for the projection of feelings, evaluations, and demands of the subject. People who dress up like animals attempt to appeal their cuteness by making themselves a passive receiver of the projected emotions.

In the earlier body of work that uses the cat as the primary motif, my goal was to create objectified anthropomorphic paintings. Inviting in nature with their small sizes and tactile

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<sup>4</sup> Joshua Paul Dale et al., *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (New York; London: Routledge, 2017), 18.

<sup>5</sup> The furry culture has been stereotyped as less innocent than they look by mainstream media, mostly because of bestiality and plushophilia (sexual attraction to stuffed animals) created by furry porn. However, furry fandom was not born out of a sexual fetish, but rather out of the fans’ desire to create a character that is a better version of themselves and to build a community with similar like-minded individuals. Although I am aware of the sexual connotation that the furry culture implies, I do not intend to portray this aspect in my work.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 18.

qualities, the cat paintings are a passive receiver of the projected emotions. They are created to allow the subjects to come closer to form an emotional bond. Simultaneously, the cat as the subject of the small paintings is frequently hiding behind an object or layers implied by paint, distancing itself from the viewer. The seemingly contradicting characteristics create a push and pull dynamic, which is one of the traits that Good Girl shares with the cat.

### 3 CO-DEPENDENCY

Even though creating and seeing the small cat paintings made me happy, these paintings seemed to lack the propensity to convey my intentions fully. These pieces were frequently adored by visitors who came up close to see them hanging on the wall, often with affectionate comments like “Awwwww, that’s so cute!” or “I like that one over there.” However, the cat as the subject, the sweetness suggested by the saturated pastel colors, and the small size of the paintings contributed to them being read as simple and cute cat paintings. In the new series of work, I began to introduce another character with similar traits as the cat, this time as a human girl. In *Neoteny* (figure 9), this cat child appears with feline features, including soft gray hair, big round eyes, tightly closed mouth, and fluffy ears. The girl appears to be standing behind the pair of cat eyes at the bottom of the painting. The strokes of the background enter the space in between the child and the cat eyes, creating an extra emotional distance. Like the cat in the previous body of work, the girl exhibits a desire to detach herself from the subject of her gaze. At the same time, the girl appears to be inviting, or perhaps demanding, with her zoomorphic ear attachments and cosmic eyes. The two characters sharing one pair of fluffy ears symbolize their bond. This period of the co-existence between the girl and the cat extended over several paintings with an emphasis on their co-dependency. The co-dependency is symbolic of the girl’s



empathetic nature towards the cat. As Mike Kelley said in his interview with the *BOMB* Magazine, handmade toys have a strange presence and appear weird because they are unconscious projections of the maker.<sup>7</sup> He further described each of the assembled dolls in his piece *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (figure 10), as a “pseudo-child; cutified, sexless beings that represent the adult’s perfect model of a child – a neutered pet.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the cat in my work is metaphorical of the “one” stuffed animal that a child holds onto as a companion. She empathizes with the cat because both share the desire to please others and become the perfect model for each other.

Creation of the stop-motion animation video *Becoming One* (figure 11), is the major shifting point at which the girl and the cat becomes one through love. In the first part of the video, the girl approaches the cat, and as the two characters are purring and kissing, their body parts are displaced and replaced on each other’s body. The girl acquires the cat ears, and the cat obtains human arms and legs. The bow from the girl’s hair moves to embellish the cat as the gray cat hair covers both of their bodies. Soon, the two characters merge into a single form resembling a heart.<sup>9</sup>

The merger is significant in the sense that the young girl, who is symbolic of my inner child, does not depend on her cat anymore, but rather embodies her feline counterpart. She no longer is hiding behind the cat but stands alone as a single entity. This piece marks the turning point at which I begin to see myself as an adult artist who still holds on to a part of my childhood rather than believing that I am as a young girl. A sense of liberation was felt inside me as I was

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<sup>7</sup> Mike Kelley, “Mike Kelley by John Miller,” Interview by John Miller, *BOMB*, Winter 1992, accessed February 09, 2018, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/mike-kelley/>.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Knight, “Mike Kelley’s Riveting Adolescent Stage,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2014, accessed April 04, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-knight-mike-kelley-moca-notebook-20140323-story.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Although viewers might discover sexual nuance from this film, the girl and the cat portray the pre-adolescent stage before knowing sex.

no longer shackled from the limitation of being a child, rather I was able to transition to a point where I am able to see and depict Good Girl more objectively. The realization that Good Girl and I were a single, yet a detached identity separated by time, gave me a hope that I was able to meet her through my paintings. The creation of this new character marks the beginning of a new series “Good Girl.” She is the embodiment of emotional anxiety, fear of growth, and insecurity about love, like how Yoshitomo Nara’s children in his paintings manifest the feeling of sorrow when left alone, an adolescent’s awkwardness growing up, and the resulting uneasiness connecting with the outside world.<sup>10</sup>

Nara’s children manifest emotions that range from desperation and sorrow to satisfaction and anticipation, as in *Untitled* (1994) (figure 12) and *Remember Me* (2005) (figure 13).<sup>11</sup> While Good Girl also manifests such complicated emotions, she does not show anger or her rebellious nature like Nara’s children. Instead, she is reserved in her expression and stays sweet and unthreatening, resembling her model cat. Gradually, Good Girl casts off her zoomorphic traits and begins to resemble a human child, perhaps, as an attempt to portray her emotions without masking them under the cuteness of the cat eyes and fur. Now, for once, Good Girl comes up to the audience with courage and even a hint of rebellion. In *BAHHHHHH* (figure 14), the Good Girl manifests herself in a way she has never done before. Encouraged by a sudden spur of positivity, she comes out to the viewer with her arms raised, ready to say out loud “Bahhhhhh,” referencing the sounds that infants make as they find their voices. This painting signals the beginning of her growth.

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<sup>10</sup> Melissa Chiu, Miwako Tezuka, and Yoshitomo Nara, *Yoshitomo Nara: Nobody's Fool* (New York: Abrams, 2010), 27.

<sup>11</sup> As Nara’s characters develop and his paintings progress throughout his career, the children’s emotions become less and less easy to decipher.

#### 4 NEOTENY

Finding it difficult to describe my ideas concisely and logically without losing their essence, I depend on Good Girl to explain them for me. The cat in my paintings have always been somewhat misunderstood as being a mere cat, so she coexisted with Good Girl. At the same time, Good Girl depended on the cat as her companion, until she finally decided to let go of her cat and become independent.

Even though Good Girl loses her physical feline characteristics, such as fluffy ears and the tail, she embodies traits of neoteny, many of which we find in domesticated animals. In her article “Art as a Neotenizing Influence on Human Development,” Merle Flannery defines neoteny as “the retention of youthful traits into the adult form of a species.”<sup>12</sup> Flannery references the studies of the anthropologist Ashley Montagu to argue that neotenous traits are manifested both physically and behaviorally. The physical neoteny is also related to the characteristics of a cute baby, identified by Konrad Lorenz’s *kindchenschema* (child schema).<sup>13</sup> Lorenz suggested that the physical infantile traits include a large head to body ratio, large and lowly set eyes, bulging cheeks, a plump body shape with short and thick extremities, a spongy, elastic consistency, and wobbly movement.<sup>14</sup> Flannery suggests that the behavioral neoteny is manifested in states of stupor, a relaxed muscle set, nonpractical play, and nonverbal methods of communication.<sup>15</sup> Good Girl embodies these physical and behavioral traits that are frequently observed in human babies. However, Good Girl is neotenous by nature, meaning that she will

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<sup>12</sup> Merle Flannery, “Art as a Neotenizing Influence on Human Development,” *Visual Arts Research* 12, no. 2 (1986), 34.

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Paul Dale, “The Appeal of the Cute Object,” *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (New York; London: Routledge, 2017), 43. Dale introduces Konrad as a pioneer in the field of ethology, the scientific study of animal behavior as an evolutionary, adaptive trait. Lorenz pioneered the study of cuteness in the 1940s by extending his theory of animal instincts to human behavior. *Kindchenschema* refers to the cross-species juvenile cute characteristics found in animals and human babies.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Flannery, 34.

maintain her youthful traits into her adulthood. Good Girl's big eyes, short arms and legs, and seemingly elastic appearance of her limbs contribute to her infantile appearance. In addition, her steady gaze implies that she is continually unfolding new information, suggesting her imaginative nature. She frequently exhibits her playful tendencies as well. Her short, stubby arms are animated in *BAHHHHHH* (figure 14) and *The Time of Bonding Between You and Me* (figure 15) in a silly manner.

Flannery argues that humans are neotenous compared to apes, and our infantile traits can be preserved through art and creative education.<sup>16</sup> However, in the end, we become adults at some point, and our neotenous traits are often suppressed as we are encouraged to sound smart, be strong, and appear cool. Good Girl rejects such expectations and remains true to her infantile traits, which mirrors a domestic cat.

## 5 DREAM

*The Cat God* (figure 16) gives me dreams. In the dream is my favorite flower, my favorite vase, my favorite toy, my favorite rainbow, my favorite stars, my favorite pinks, and Minnie. A lot of Minnies. – Good Girl<sup>17</sup>

In addition to having her lips tightly closed, Good Girl frequently suggests a state of latency. Good Girl constantly dreams, both day and night, and these are manifested through my drawings and paintings. Animals, mainly, cats, are important elements of these dreamlike paintings as Good Girl frequently dreams of them. I keep a diary to record dreams as soon as I wake up (figure 17), which becomes a valuable source of ideas for my body of work.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Flannery explains that the human skull varies little from infancy to adulthood, while the ape goes through a process that is the opposite of neoteny, called *gerontomorphosis*, or the development of the characteristics of old age.

<sup>17</sup> I began a practice of writing in Good Girl's voice to describe the pieces after they have been completed. Sometimes, phrases in these writings become the titles of the pieces. In this case, the title *Cat God* has been given to signify the large floating character from which the small motives fall.

The frequency of anxious cat dreams that I have been dreaming sparked my interest in artists who work with animals as primary motifs. As he presents ten female artists representing the new generation in Japan, Ivan Vartanian describes that the connection of animals and emotions is one prevalent theme among these artists.<sup>18</sup> The animal representation as a portal to the human emotional landscape can be recognized in Kakiki Kudo's drawings and paintings. Vartanian summarizes that "Kudo's compositions, which she calls 'chaotic,' follow the playful logic of dreams, where the various parts fit together according to a pattern that is beyond the conscious mind."<sup>19</sup> Shapes with defined edges with a lack of value give Kudo's drawings and paintings the effect of flatness. To quote Vartanian, such aspects give her work the feel of a "floating atmosphere."<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, in Kakiki Kudo's *Hot Summer Morning* (figure 18), the transparency of the big cat guardian adds to the dreamlike quality of the imagery. In addition, the dreamy sense of atmosphere is created with the floating shapes, figures, and landscapes that seem to defy the law of gravity and perspective. The rough and translucent paint application also adds to the dreamy quality by resembling a work in progress. Similar to Kudo's girls in her paintings, Good Girl is also not bound by a sense of time, gravity, logic, and reasoning.

Recently, I have begun to look in depth at the work of the French Post-Impressionist painter, Pierre Bonnard. It is known that Bonnard mainly worked from his memories. Because memories are layered together without following the rules of the hierarchy of time, his paintings present dreamlike quality to the viewers. According to Rika Burnham, "Bonnard was always

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<sup>18</sup> Ivan Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute: The New Generation of Women Artists in Japan* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle, 2005), 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

patrolling the boundary between the solid and the spectral, between reality and dreams.”<sup>21</sup> On paintings such as *Terrace at Vernonnet* (figure 19), he worked on the same painting for over twenty years, adding new memories and dabs of colors as paintings became less and less clear.<sup>22</sup> According to Munck, “Bonnard’s paintings suggest his removal from the acceleration of the adult world into the continuous present of the early childhood, a time before one becomes familiar with the sequence of events, their chronology and conjunction.”<sup>23</sup> For this reason, Bonnard’s paintings do not make the time of events clear. In *The Bowl of Milk* (figure 20), it is not clear if the scene is taking place in the late evening or early morning. Also, in all of Bonnard’s paintings, Marthe, his wife and muse, is always the same age.<sup>24</sup> As he mainly painted from his memory, Bonnard depicted Marthe as being timeless, sometimes as a remembrance, sometimes in the form of anticipation, and sometimes as a projection of self. Like Kudo and Bonnard, I am interested in depicting the things of my everyday life, childhood memories, and dreams in a way that doesn’t follow the rationale defined by language and time.

## 6 ENCOUNTER: MEETING GOOD GIRL SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN THE DREAM, MEMORIES, AND THE EVERYDAY LIFE

I frequently refer to my dream journal entries to create preliminary sketches for my paintings. In conjunction with this practice, I have been writing short poems and excerpts in Good Girl’s voice to describe the pieces after they have been completed. Some parts of these writings have become the titles of the pieces, as in *Cat God* (figure 16). The dreams help me

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<sup>21</sup> Rika Burnham, “Intelligent Seeing,” *Pierre Bonnard: The Late Still Lifes and Interiors* (New York; New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2009), 71.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Jacqueline Munck, “The Cat Drank All the Milk!: Bonnard’s Continuous Present,” In *Pierre Bonnard: Late Still Lifes and Interiors* (New York; New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2009), 66.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Hammond, and John Elderfield, “Pierre Bonnard: An Interview with John Elderfield,” *MoMA* 1, no. 3 (1998), 13.

understand Good Girl's psychology and the narrative poems allow me to interpret my paintings through a child's mind. I consider both my dream journal entries and the poems as places for me to meet Good Girl.

What I hope to achieve through this process is encountering Good Girl somewhere in between my dreams, memories, and the everyday life. As I have previously suggested, Good Girl is a character that allows me to examine myself from multiple perspectives without being bound by age, place, and time. For the same reason, my paintings do not follow a chronological narrative, but rather represents fragments of memories and everyday events. In addition, the settings in which Good Girl is situated are often never specific enough to be associated with a particular time or event. For example, in *Good Girl is Blue* (figure 21), Good Girl meets her reflection through a window. The juxtaposition of the two figures facing each other suggests a presence of a dividing structure. The figure inside this dividing structure gazes towards the viewer. As the transparent nature of this figure creates a sense of illusion, the main character outside the window is depicted with more body and weight.

However, there is a point at which the foreground figure makes contact with the illusionistic figure, as the color and paint strokes blend at their contact point. I depict the palpable, yet the intangible quality of memories and dreams through this piece. The thinly dripping paint quality inside the window frame was inspired by the texture in the steamy shower booth as well as the surface of a window on a cold winter day. By merging my everyday life with the elements of childhood and dreams, I hope to create images that encompass different times and moments of my life.

Similarly, *Three Good Girls* (figure 22) is a piece that describes the cyclical nature of a relationship between a mother and a child. The figure that takes over the negative space signifies

a mother. The middle figure is sitting on her lap holding another figure. The holding arms and extended legs create repetition. These repetitive elements lead to the focal point, which is the small puppet-like figure in the center of the painting. The composition makes it ambiguous to tell which character is Good Girl. The title *Three Good Girls* also suggest the ambiguity of the relationship. The central character with big eyes plays both the role of protector and the protected by being situated in between the large and small figures.

The ambiguity of the space and time is further illustrated in *Goodbye, Good Girl* (figure 23). In this painting, Good Girl is lying down inside a big floating bubble. She is facing a cat wrapped in a blanket. Small jewel tears flow down from Good Girl's eyes. The circular motifs in the jewel tears mirror the big bubble, creating a visual repetition. The repetition suggests that there might be more than one floating bubble, or memory, in the space. The bubble represents the ephemeral nature of precious memories. While alluding to the nostalgia for the past, the bubble also foreshadows the time when Good Girl must say goodbye to her cat.

The ambiguous nature of space, time, relationship, and scale serves as a way for me to converge my everyday domestic life with the inexplicable emotions that I have collected in my memories and dreams. Through this convergence, I illustrate the timeless nature of Good Girl by merging the past, present, and future. This fluid nature of the character allows me to encounter various versions of Good Girl. Through this encounter, I hope to relieve her from darkness and have a chance to better understand myself and people around me.



## 7 SWEATY PALMS AND THE SMILE

*My palms are sweating. But I have to keep smiling. Because I am Good Girl. Sweaty Palms and the Smile* (figure 24). – Good Girl<sup>25</sup>

My thesis exhibition “Good Girl: Sweaty Palms and the Smile” is a combination of paintings, small figurines, and a video piece illustrating the complicated emotions that arise from childhood memories and childlike impulses. The play with dichotomies is a component that underlies in this body of work. The contrasting emotions that the words “sweaty palms” and “the smile” elicit through the title is one such example. Sweaty palms hint at the frail and anxious nature of Good Girl, whereas the smile suggests a feeling of content and positivity. The coexistence of these seemingly contrasting emotions creates complexity, which is an element that characterizes Good Girl. In *Sweaty Palms* (figure 24), a pair of simplified hands with smiley faces are painted with palm side up. The color palette is muted in a spectrum of warm grays with hints of blues and pinks. The darkness of the colors is offset by the bright shine of mica powder.

Likewise, the dichotomy is manifested through the handling of paint. In this body of work, the cute and sweet nature of Good Girl is muffled by the gray color palette and the loose brush strokes. For example, in *Happy Birthday, Good Girl* (figure 25), Good Girl is celebrating her birthday. The excitement and happiness suggested by the title, the cake, and the candle is neutralized with the muted colors and the loose brushstrokes that suggest the quivering feeling in the atmosphere right before she blows off the candle.

The paintings of Luc Tuymans have been valuable references for me, in terms of the muted color palette and the sense of ambiguity it adds to his work. Luc Tuymans’ oeuvre is

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<sup>25</sup> The introduction in italics are excerpts from poems that I write in the Good Girl’s voice. These poems become important sources for creating idea sketches, which I eventually develop into final paintings. Occasionally, the parts of the poems become titles for the final pieces.

characterized by the palette of bruised pinks and grays that have been worked wet into wet. In *Insomnia* (1988) (figure 26), Tuymans represents ordinary floor stains to portray the ambiguity of the representation.<sup>26</sup> The state of in-between and the sense of loss are manifested by painting two spots layered together. He merges the two layers into one by allowing the paint to mix wet into wet, painting thick white layer on top of the still soluble black spot. This mixture has permanently faded the purity of the black and white marks and left them in a state of in-between murky gray.

Tuymans' use of the muted colors and his permission to leave painting imprecise and uncertain allow room for ambiguities to be present. In *Happy Birthday, Good Girl* (figure 25), the physical textures are achieved through a gradual buildup of the layers on top of a thinly painted background. The wet layer is topped off with thicker and brighter marks on top. This is a representation of how the present moment exists on top of multiple layers of the past. Each wet layer makes its marks yet leaves the underneath visible like Tuymans' gray spot. This suggests that the present contains the remnants of the past.

Normally, people would associate a young girl with traits such as purity and simplicity. Instead, I wanted to depict Good Girl's complicated emotions lying underneath the playful nature that the birthday theme suggests. Likewise, the more bright and tangible elements of the glitters in *Sweaty Palms* serve to offset the dark colors of the sweaty palms in the background.

*Sweaty Palms* most straightforwardly manifests such dichotomy between the dark and the nonchalant. This is why when deciding the arrangement for the show, I hung *Sweaty Palms* on the center wall that is most visible from the outside of the gallery through the glass entrance wall.

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<sup>26</sup> Madeleine Grynsztejn and Helen Molesworth, *Luc Tuymans* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 85.

While *Sweaty Palms* became the main piece, it also functioned as the terminal piece, encouraging the viewers to see other paintings before reaching *Sweaty Palms*. On the other hand, *Bandage Bum*, the smallest piece in the show, was hung next to the entrance (figure 27). I hoped that the familiar body parts and the smiles in both paintings would function to invite public engagement (figure 28) while serving as the anchor pieces to tie together other work like clasps on a bracelet. *Becoming One* was presented on a 15-inch tablet slightly below the eye-level along with two sets of needle-felted figurines on a pedestal. Audiences were encouraged to listen to the sound component through headsets and interact with small figurines for a more intimate experience. The video piece and the figurines were placed in front of the glass wall to give enough space for the paintings on the long parallel walls leading to *Sweaty Palms*. When creating the layout of the exhibition, I took into consideration color schemes and balance between pieces, rather than arranging them with a narrative in mind. This resembles how I want the viewers to read my paintings, without a chronological narrative, but rather as floating memories and dreams (figure 29).

## 8 CONCLUSION

I rely on Good Girl as a character to express emotions that I've noticed in children and animals. These feelings coincide with the ones that I felt as a child, which are timelessly present in my mind. These feelings occasionally resurface in the form of déjà-vu or dream, creating a sense of nostalgia. As an adult artist, I now depend on Good Girl to tell a story which I have hard time narrating in my grown-up voice. In the end, Good Girl is an inseparable element of my work. She lives inside of me and speaks the voice of my inner child. Good Girl is like Bonnard's Marthe, represented as being ageless in my work but embodies past, present, and future in the form of memories, everyday life, and dreams.

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**APPENDIX: FIGURES**

Figure 1. Minnie.  
Minnie was found and adopted as a stray kitten in November 2015.



Figure 2. *Parisian Cat*, 2016.  
Acrylic and oil on panel, wool roving, glitters, 11 x 10 in.



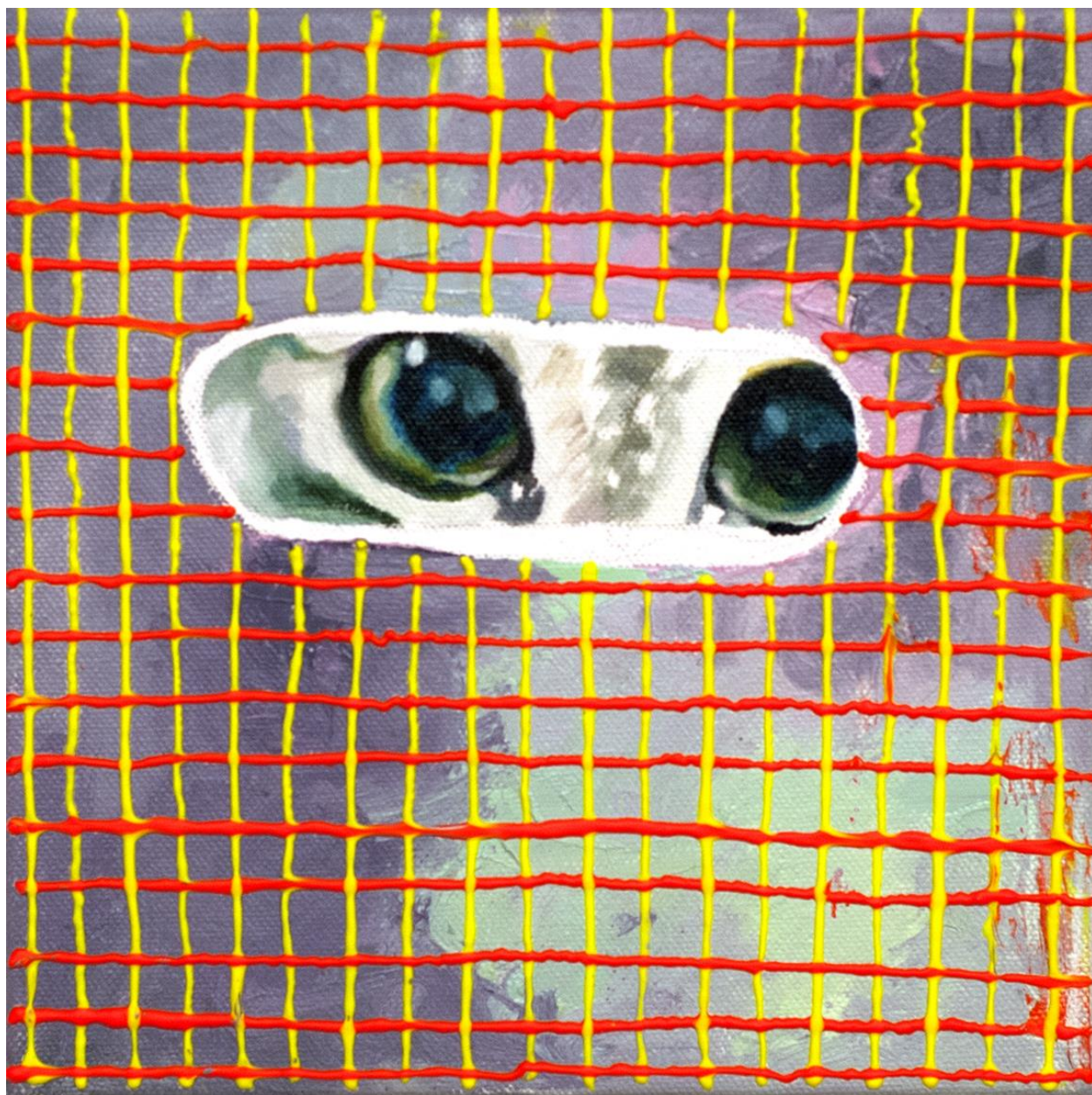


Figure 3. *In the Grid*, 2016.  
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 8 x 8 in.

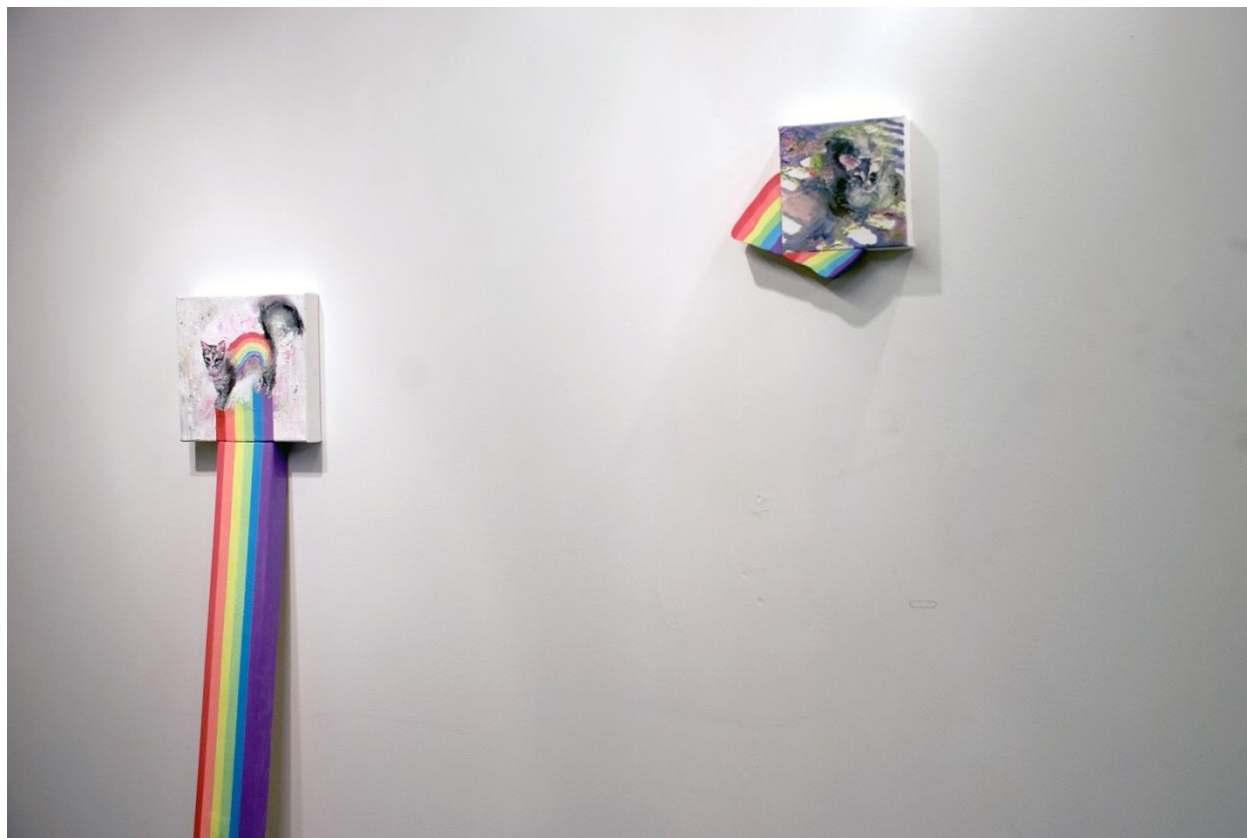


Figure 4. *Hide and Seek*, 2016.  
Acrylic and oil on panel, flocking fiber, glitter glue, 11 x 8 in.





Figure 5. *Curled*, 2016.  
Oil on canvas, glitters, wool roving, cat hair, 6 x 8 in.



*Figure 6. Rainbow!, 2016.*  
Oil on canvas, glitters, plywood bar, 56 x 8 in.



Figure 7. Frog Sponge.

From: Ngai, Sianne, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 65.



Figure 8. Kumamoto prefecture's official mascot Kumamon.

In this image, Kumamon rides the Kumamon-themed scooter made by Honda.

Photograph: The Asahi Shimbun/Asahi Shimbun/Getty Images. From: Neil Steinberg, "The New Science of Cute," The Guardian, July 19, 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/19/kumamon-the-new-science-of-cute>.





Figure 9. *Neoteny*, 2016-2017.  
Acrylic and oil on canvas, fabric, 55 x 50 in.



Figure 10. Mike Kelley, *More Love Hours Than Can Every Be Repaid*, 1987.

Stuffed fabric toys and afghans on canvas with dried corn; wax candles on wood and metal base, 306.7 x 385.4 x 80.6 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

From: "Mike Kelley: More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin, 1987."  
<http://collection.whitney.org/object/7317>.





Figure 11. *Becoming One*, 2016.  
Video, 40 sec.



Figure 12. Yoshitomo Nara, *Untitled*, 1994.

Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 130 cm.

From: Melissa Chiu et. al. *Yoshitomo Nara: Nobody's Fool* (New York: Abrams, 2010), 46-7.



Figure 13. Yoshitomo Nara, *Remember Me*, 2005.

Acrylic on paper, 55 x 55.5 in.

From: Melissa Chiu, Miwako Tezuka, and Yoshitomo Nara. *Yoshitomo Nara: Nobody's Fool*. New York: Abrams, 2010, 82.



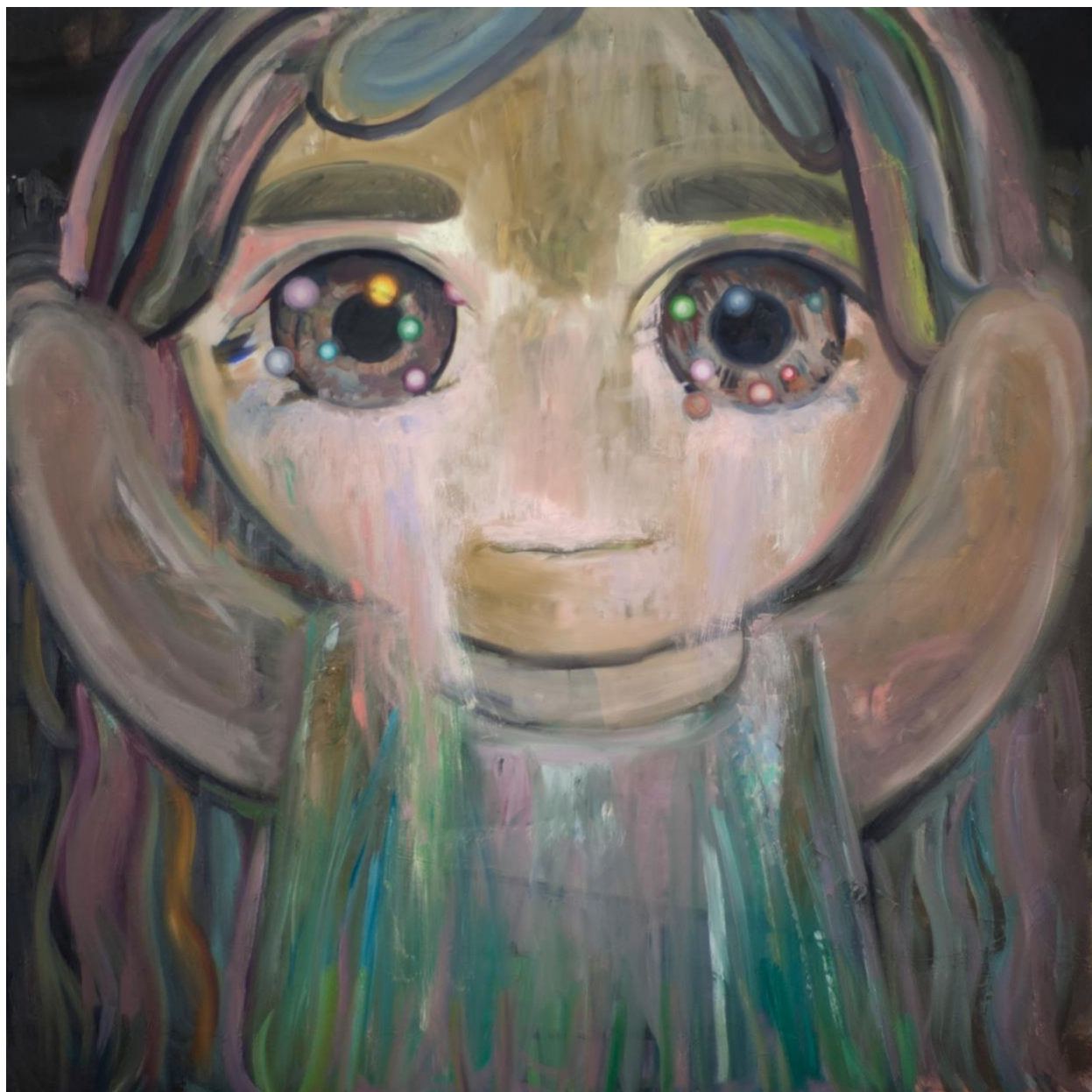


Figure 14. *BAHHHHHH*, 2017.  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in.



Figure 15. *The Time of Bonding Between You and Me*, 2017.  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.





Figure 16. *Cat God*, 2017.  
Oil, pastel, marker, and nail polish on paper, 30 x 24 in.

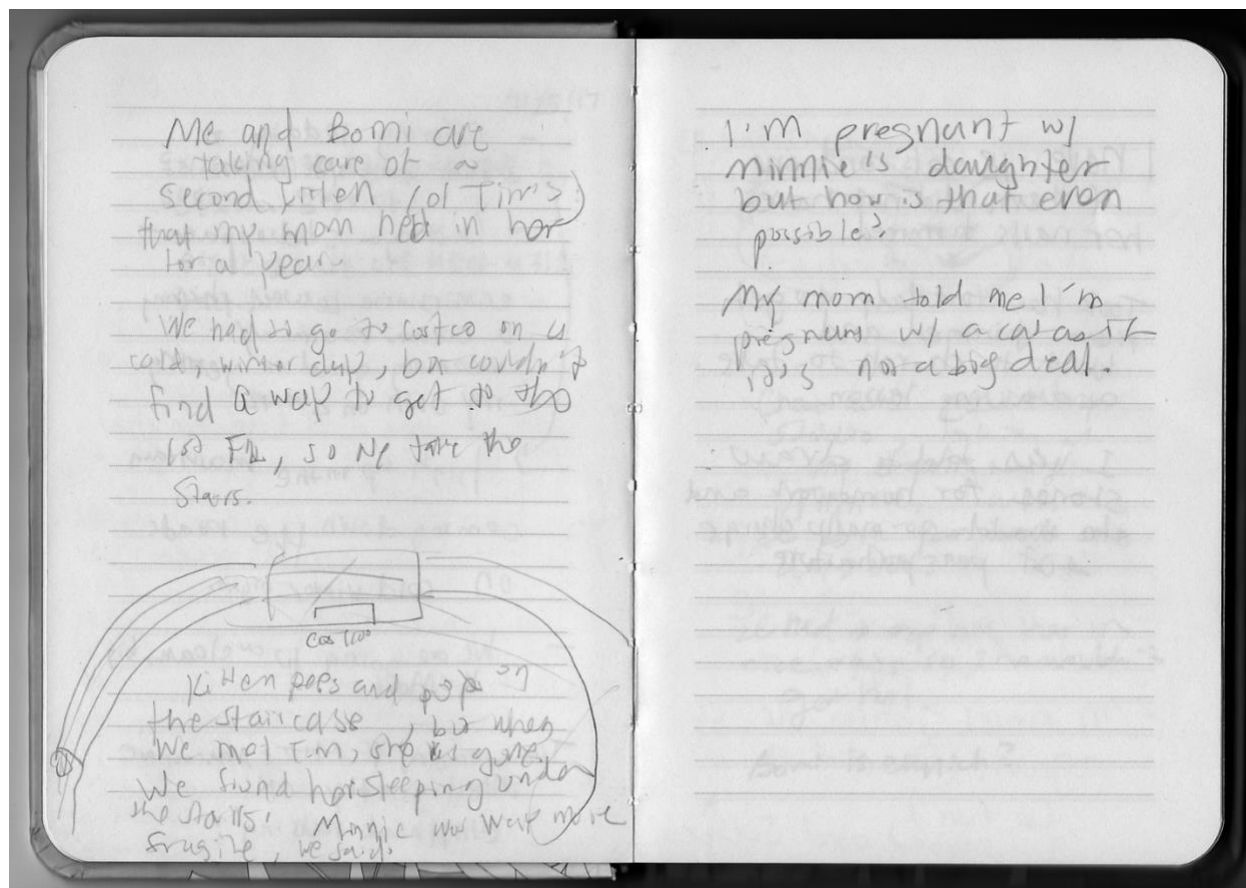


Figure 17. Dream journal entries in the voice of Good Girl.

These entries become source materials for preliminary sketches and titles.



Figure 18. Kakiki Kudo, *Hot Summer Morning*, 2001.

Oil on canvas, 130.5 x 162 cm.

From: Ivan Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute: The New Generation of Women Artists in Japan* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle, 2005), 27.



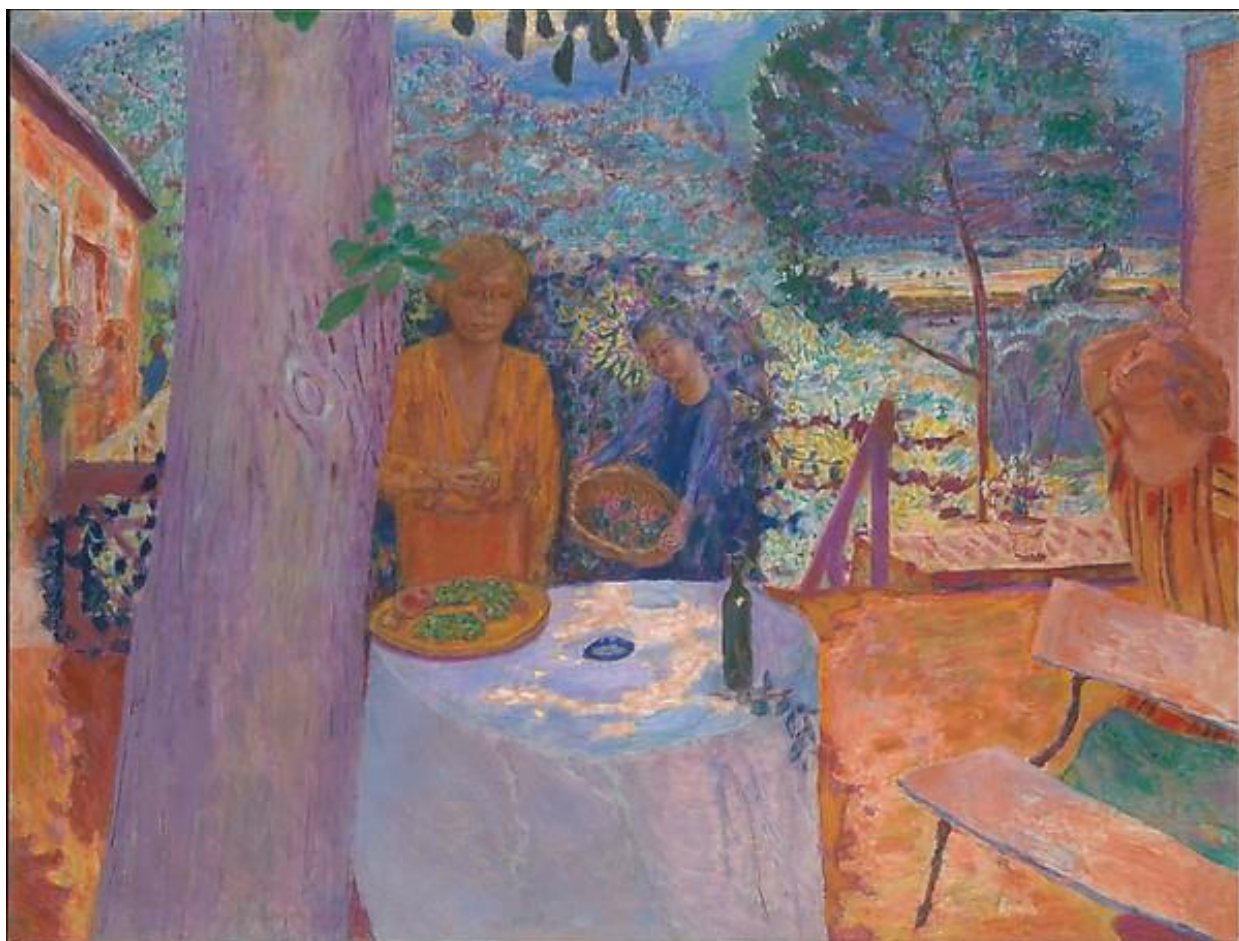


Figure 19. Pierre Bonnard, *The Terrace at Vernonnet*, 1920-1939.

Oil on canvas, 58.25 x 76.75 in.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Mrs. Frank Jay Gould, 1968.

From: Dita Amory et al. *Pierre Bonnard: The Late Still Lifes and Interiors*. New York; New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2009, 71.



Figure 20. Pierre Bonnard, *The Bowl of Milk*, 1919.  
Oil on canvas, 116.2 x 121 cm. Tate Gallery, London; Bequeathed by Edward Le Bas, 1967.  
From: Elderfield, John, and Sarah Whitfield. *Bonnard*. London: Tate Gallery, 1998. Plate 35.





Figure 21. *Good Girl is Blue*, 2018.  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.



Figure 22. *Three Good Girls*, 2017.  
Oil on canvas, 64 x 48 in.





Figure 23. *Goodbye, Good Girl*, 2018.  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in.



Figure 24. *Sweaty Palms*, 2018.  
Oil on canvas, mica powder, 72 x 72 in.



Figure 25. *Happy Birthday, Good Girl*, 2018.  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.





Figure 26. Luc Tuymans, *Insomnia*, 1988.  
Oil on canvas, 17.3 x 21.1 in. David Zwirner, New York.  
From: Art Basel. "Luc Tuymans: *Insomnia*, 1988." 2016.  
<https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/40977/Luc-Tuymans-Insomnia>.



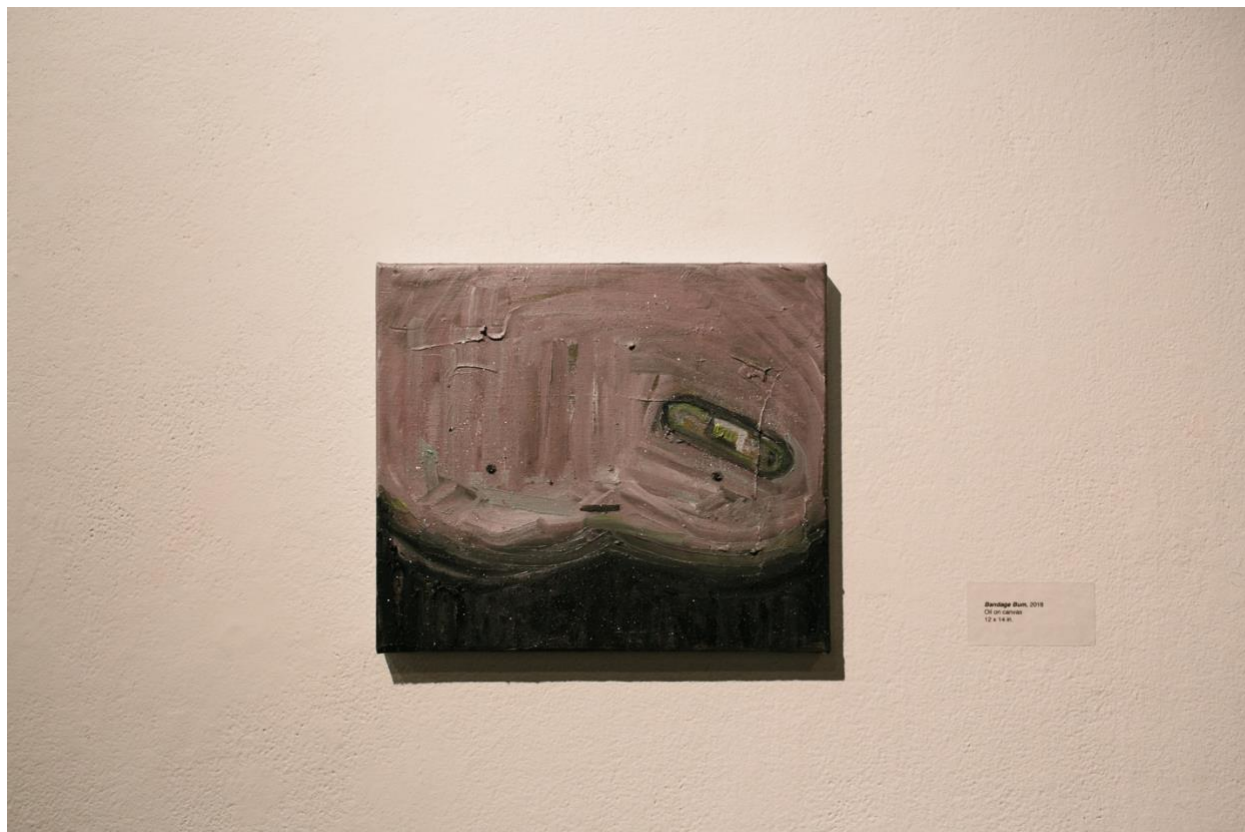


Figure 27. *Bandage Bum*, 2018.

Oil on canvas, glitters, mica powder, 12 x 14 in.

From: *Good Girl: Sweaty Palms and the Smile* at the Ernest G. Welch School Gallery.



Figure 28. Audiences interact with *Sweaty Palms*.  
From: *Good Girl: Sweaty Palms and the Smile* at the Ernest G. Welch School Gallery.

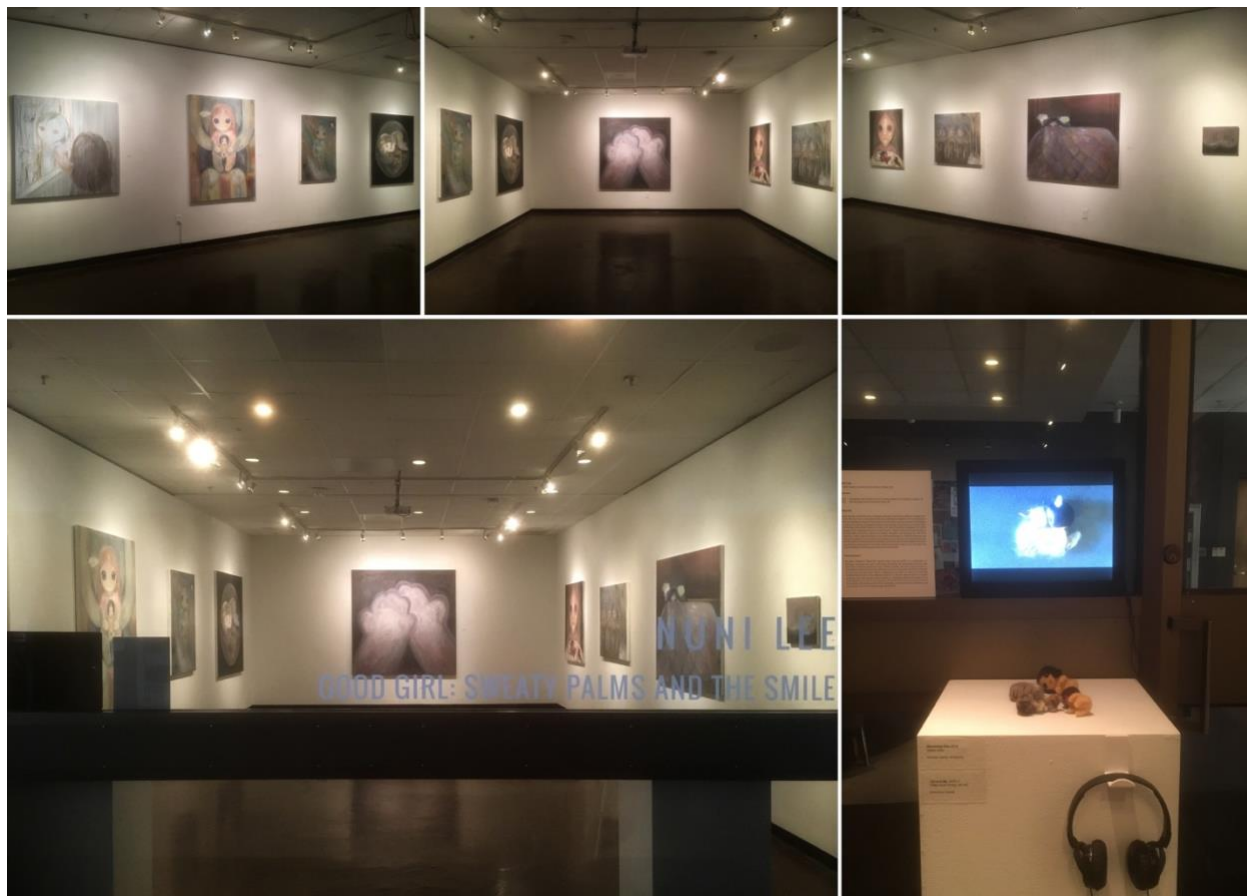


Figure 29. *Good Girl: Sweaty Palms and the Smile* exhibition images, 2018.